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# PROLETKULT: ITS PRETENSIONS AND FALLACIES

BY LEO PASVOLSKY

ONE of the most interesting by-products of the Russian experiment in Communism has been the rise of a movement for the creation of a proletarian culture. The movement has taken the name of *Proletkult*, which is, obviously, a contraction of the words "proletarian culture." As the name itself indicates, it is a movement designed to create a culture that would have a strictly class basis and would be the expression of the thoughts and the emotions of a class, viz., the proletariat.

For purposes of the present, this class culture is opposed by its prophets and inspirers to what the world has become accustomed to regarding as universal or human culture, which has mankind as a whole for its basis and serves as an expression of the thoughts and the emotions of man as such, not primarily or exclusively as a unit of a more or less homogeneous social class. Eventually, the prophets of the Proletkult assure us, the proletarian culture would become non-class or super-class, i.e. again universal, human. But this new culture of the future will be fundamentally different from what is called culture today.

Up to several months ago, the Proletkult movement remained strictly Russian, a by-play of the Russian Communist experiment. But last August it became invested with the dignity of a world movement. At the time when the Second Congress of the Third or Communist International had its sessions in Moscow, a group of delegates to the Congress met at the invitation of the Central Committee of the All-Russian Proletkult for the purpose of organizing a world Proletkult movement. At this conference, a temporary International Bureau of the Proletkult was created, consisting of fifteen members. An appeal to the workmen of all countries was worked out by this International Bureau and plans were laid for an active development of the

movement, the objects of which were announced as follows: The dissemination of the principles of the Proletkult; the organization of the Proletkult movement in all countries; and extended preparations for a World Congress of the Proletkult. In the terms of this announcement, the proletarian culture is regarded primarily as another weapon in the hands of the proletariat for its class struggle against the bourgeoisie, in addition to the weapons heretofore used on a world-wide scale in the fields of political and economic activity.

The most authoritative spokesman of the movement for a proletarian culture is, beyond any doubt, A. Lunacharsky. He is the Commissary of Education in the Soviet Government, therefore in charge of all the educational and artistic work of the Russian Communist régime. The Proletkult movement is an old idea of his: even before the war he was already preaching it and was ready to introduce it for discussion at the Congress of the Socialist International which was to have taken place in Vienna in the fall of 1914. He was an ardent agitator for it during the first period of the revolution. He became a powerful and official sponsor of it after the November overturn of the Provisional Government. At the August conference in Moscow he was chosen President of the Executive Committee of the International Bureau of the Proletkult.

It is well, therefore, to look to Lunacharsky for an exposition of the fundamental ideas of the Proletkult. We can find much that sheds light on this subject in a pamphlet of his, entitled, *The Cultural Aims of the Working Class*. The importance which is attached to this pamphlet may be seen from the fact that a careful reading of it is required of every member of the different organizations of the Russian Proletkult, as well as of every person, wishing to affiliate himself with the movement.

Lunacharsky looks upon Socialism as a movement, analogous to Christianity, or any other movement, striving for an ideal and instinct with fervid enthusiasm. And he considers that the well known division of the development of Christianity into two stages, found in the characterization given by Thomas Aquinas, is eminently applicable to Socialism. In the conception of the great theologian, there are two churches: (1) the *Ecclesia trium-*

*phans*—the Church Triumphant—the Church of the saints and the blessed, full of light, and a realization of victory and peace; and (2) the *Ecclesia militans*—the Church Militant—the Church of the martyrs, of those who suffer and perish in its name, full of trials, and sorrows, and defeats. The first is the realization, the attainment of the blessed City; the second is the striving for it, through faith and hope.

So it is necessary to distinguish between the Socialistic and the proletarian cultures. They are not the same, but they are two stages of the same movement. The Socialistic culture is the *Ecclesia triumphans* of Socialism; it is a culture which is “universally human, harmonious, classical in type.” As for its content, “established and developed through a healthy organic process, it will assume definite forms, thoroughly in conformity with itself.” Not so with the proletarian culture. It is the *Ecclesia militans* of Socialism; it is a culture which is “sharply isolated, based on class struggle, romantic in type.” It develops under a strain; its content is usually ahead of the form, for “there is no time to pay adequate attention to definite and perfect forms when the content is so tragic and tempestuous.” There are, obviously, many important and far-reaching differences between the Socialistic and the proletarian cultures, but there are profound ties of kinship that bind them together.

The most important of these ties of kinship lies in the fact that they are but stages in the struggle for a definite ideal, common to both. Lunacharsky gives the following definition of this ideal:

It is the ideal of fraternity and brotherhood, of complete liberty; the ideal of a victory over individualism, which maims and cripples man; the ideal of the blossoming out of collectivism in mass life, based no longer upon compulsion and the herd system as it has been so often in the past, but upon new, organic—or rather, superorganic—free and natural merging of a personality into superpersonal unities.

Such is the ideal. Where are the means for its realization? Where are its seeds, and what is the ground in which these seeds may thrive?

Socialism grows out of capitalism. The Socialistic system of economic production is the capitalistic system, only “transformed,

organically metamorphosed." So the Socialistic culture must be an organic transformation of the present culture. There are two extremes in the Socialist movement with this regard. The first would cast away everything that has the faintest connection with the bourgeois culture, and would reduce everything to the austere and stern plainness of the struggle. The second extreme also wants to destroy the bourgeois culture, but to uprear on its ruins *immediately* a culture that would present every earmark of still greater development.

Lunacharsky opposes both of these extremes. The first he terms "the Quakerism" in Socialism, and believes that it springs from narrowness of vision on the part of the backward elements of the proletariat. The second he characterizes as springing from the romantic extension of vision and overflowing self-confidence on the part of some of the advanced elements of the proletariat, which have not as yet made a calm and appraising study of the legacy remaining over from the old culture, in which "the ugly and the beautiful are mingled together and need sorting out." What is needed now is sufficient insight and courage to call the ugly, ugly, and the beautiful, beautiful, and then act accordingly.

The Socialistic culture is the culture of the future; the proletarian culture is the culture of today. Has it anything of its own, besides what it can take over from the bourgeois culture and adapt to its purposes? And does it have a standard that it can apply to the process of "sorting out" the legacy of the bourgeois past?

Such a standard exists theoretically. The ideal cannot grow out of seeds and in a soil which are foreign to it. Yet it should not be forgotten that the ideal grew up and developed in the capitalistic order, in the course of the struggle. Many of the means for achieving it have come into existence in the same way. And what is most important of all, now, is to see to it that those means which are fashioned for the impending stages of the struggle should not be such as to defeat the aims of the ideal itself.

Who will be the creators of the proletarian culture? First of all, the proletarians themselves. Then, those of the other classes who will embrace wholeheartedly the proletarian ideal. But it

usually happens that those who graduate from the stratum of toil into the stratum of art lose contact with the stratum from which they come and enter the ranks of the Intelligentsia, that peculiar social formation which is essentially non-class. And the best proof of the validity of this objection lies in the fact that there is such a thing as a "proletarian Intelligentsia." Lunacharsky answers this objection by expressing his belief that a truly talented artist, springing from the working class, cannot lose contact with the class from which he comes, that his talent itself will keep him "revolving in the orbit of the proletarian ideal." This is, perhaps, the weakest place in Lunacharsky's whole exposition of the fundamental ideas and the theory of the Proletkult. This weakness, as well as a number of others, become particularly apparent when we consider the forms into which the theory of the Proletkult has translated itself in Russia.

When Lunacharsky became Minister of Education in the Soviet Government, he did not attempt to introduce the theory of the Proletkult into the work of his department. This was natural enough. Such a change in the whole system of education would require a very large new personnel; and there was none. For the purpose of carrying on the work of education, it was necessary for the new government to obtain the services of the former teachers. And with great difficulties, facing at the beginning even strikes of protest on the part of whole groups of teachers, Lunacharsky finally succeeded in building up a teaching staff for the schools under his control. Those teachers could teach only things of which they had knowledge; certainly they could not teach the ideas of the Proletkult.

There was another difficulty which Lunacharsky faced from the beginning. The Soviet Government is officially known as the "Workman-Peasant" authority. While an expression of the dictatorship of one class, the proletariat, the Soviet Government rules over the masses of the people. As long as they were merely the guiding spirits of their party, the Bolshevik leaders could look at things exclusively from the point of view of *class*. When they became the Government, they found themselves rulers over the masses of the people and had to adapt themselves to the idea of *mass*. The system of education that Lunacharsky had to

build up was for the people, not for the proletariat alone. Whatever might be possible in the future, at the present time in his governmental work Lunarcharsky cannot translate the ideas of the Proletkult into tangible forms.

But, even conscious of all these difficulties, Lunacharsky was not prepared to give up his idea of the Proletkult, nor did he see any need for doing so. He simply set to work building up another organization, parallel with his official system of education. Here he could experiment as much as he wished with the ideas that he was so anxious to try out.

In actual application, the ideas of the Proletkult found expression in school-clubs for adults. The system of organization is the establishment of such schools or clubs, or combined school-clubs, in industrial centers. They are intended exclusively for the industrial proletariat. They are not governmental institutions, but are subsidized by the Government and aided by it in other ways. As with all other forms of Communist organization, the various clubs and schools in each city are expected to unite by means of a body representing all of them and covering the whole district. Such a body would be known as the Proletkult for that city or district. All the city or district Proletkults would unite into regional Proletkults, and finally all of them are brought together by the All-Russian Proletkult. And just as with all the other Soviet forms, there is here a system of internal hierarchical subordination. The Proletkult movement being still in comparative infancy, has not, as yet, perfected this form of organization to the same degree as has been done in the domains of political and economic life; but the lines of development have already been definitely indicated.

So far as the units themselves are concerned, the clubs present nothing unusual or original from the point of view of organization. The schools, however, are built on the lines of studios or university seminars, rather than of class-rooms. These studios are intended to be the workshops, as well as places of theoretical study, for the various branches of science, art, literature, and music, which are being taught. The fundamental idea, of course, is that these studios must be the creative centers of the new culture.

At the literary studios, the workmen who attend them are taught literary appreciation and literary technique. They are encouraged to write, in prose and verse. Their work is read and discussed. At the musical studios, instrumental and vocal music is taught, and lectures are delivered on different questions concerned with the study and the composition of music. Most attention is paid to group singing and playing. At the theatrical studios, both dramatic art and composition are taught. At the art studios, all branches of graphic art are taught and original work in all of them encouraged. For scientific study and research it is planned to have Proletarian Universities, operating in conjunction with the Proletkults. The first such university was established in Moscow last year.

It is clear that all this work requires a teaching personnel, and for this reason alone the development of the Proletkult would be considerably hampered. Only very few centers can have a well-functioning Proletkult organization. In order to overcome this difficulty, the Moscow Proletkult, which is, naturally, the best equipped, has organized a special course for training Proletkult instructors. The course lasts from ten weeks to three months. During this period, the students are expected to acquire the necessary knowledge according to the following programme: The world revolution and the Soviet authority; the principles of the Proletkult; the elements of proletarian culture; the elements of past civilizations; the constructive principle of the Socialistic culture; the methods and the work of the Proletkults; the organization and the work of the various studios. It is, of course, inconceivable that even a superficial knowledge of all these subjects can be acquired in so short a time. Nevertheless, the Moscow Proletkult works according to this scheme. How much knowledge in so overwhelmingly important a matter as the creation of a new culture such instructors can impart, is more than problematic.

Concerning the extent of the Proletkult movement in Russia there is very little actual information available. In the appeal issued by the International Bureau of the Proletkult it is stated that the total number of persons taking part in the movement all over the country is about one hundred thousand. Of them,



about eighty thousand persons actually do work in the various studios. From the point of view of the enlightenment of the masses generally, this may not be considered as meager success. But from the point of view of creating a new culture, it is not quantity, but quality that counts. And on this score, the reports so far are not very encouraging.

Although the leaders of the Proletkult keep on emphasizing the fact that they are struggling against individualism, not individuality, the results which they get indicate that no distinction is actually made between the two. For example, a critical review of the work done in the art studios of the Moscow Proletkult, published in its official organ, *Gudki*, complains of an utter lack of originality. The prevailing tone of the work is "heavy monotony. At times it seems as though all the students were a single person." The same thing is found in literature. There is drab uniformity of subject and treatment. In music not a single composition of note has been reported by the organs of the Proletkult.

The only domain of artistic work in which one can find at least an echo of the fundamental ideas, enunciated by the leaders of the Proletkult movement, is in the poetry; and even then, only if we take the work of a small group of men as representing the spirit of the movement. In the work of these men we find a number of fundamental aspects which are of interest.

Like all other movements seeking a basis in fervid enthusiasm, the Proletkult finds most facile expression in lyric form. And the distinguishing features of this poetry no doubt lie in its basic moments and motives.

The poetry of the Proletkult is the song of the city, as distinguished from either the village or the country as a whole. The city is taken in the sense of an industrial center, an aggregate of those who "create all wealth" through industrial production.

The village represents poverty, inertness, stolid obedience to fate. The city stands for creative effort, motion, dynamic activity.

But the proletarian poet cannot conceive of love for the city without estrangement from the village. Class struggle demands this, for it is based upon class antagonism, hence class estrangement.

In the city, the Proletkult poet sings primarily of the factory and the machine. And this song must be one of praise, a paean of adoration, a hymn. Everything that is not such a paean and a hymn is almost a sacrilege. So, M. Herasimov, though a class-conscious workman and a revolutionary, is classed as only "semi-proletarian," when he begins his poem, "The Cross," in the following manner:

The morning siren screeches shrilly  
And calls free slaves to daily task.

Huge blocks of iron, carried from machine to machine, appear to the poet like "coffins." A fatal accident to one of the workmen he represents as "crucifixion on a fiery cross."

Another feature of the Proletkult poetry is the austere sternness of its conceptions, verging almost on asceticism. To this extent, at any rate, the Proletkult is, indeed, an *Ecclesia militans*.

Nicholai Poletayev, in describing the first anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution ("The Red Square"), sees in it no indication for him of contentment or happiness; no enthusiasm of festive joy:

No bright, triumphant celebration,  
No laughter, sparkling at each turn,  
But cold and stark realization  
Of duty, unavowed, stern.

There must be no complaints, no grievings for the past, no sentimental hopes for the future. Only confidence and stoicism.

Still another characteristic feature of the proletarian poetry is less tangible, though equally important. A proletarian poet should sing the collective will and thought, not individual endeavor.

To the proletarian there is no individual joy in the revolution. It is not a fête; it is the performance of "duty, unavowed, stern." It is a stage in the struggle. Individually, it is his doom. But collectively, it is his realization. The singer of the Proletkult sees Labor grow huge in collective effort. He merges himself with it, and sees himself rising far beyond even his own beloved factory. A. Gastev describes this as follows:

New, iron blood flows in my veins.  
Shoulders of steel and hands of power unmeasured are mine.

I have merged with the metal itself.

I have risen,

Pushing the beams aside, bursting open the roof.

My feet are still on the earth, but my head is over the building.

And still choking and gasping from efforts inhuman. I cry,

"Word, comrade, give me the word!"

No, not a tale shall I tell, not a speech, no, only my word of hard iron I'll shout,

"We are the victors!"

In considering the work of the Russian Proletkult, there is one characteristic peculiarity that stands out above all: the pretentious artificiality of the setting.

The various divisions of the Russian Proletkult publishes fifteen magazines of various kinds. I have had an opportunity to read carefully some of the most important ones. If you take away from them the label of the Proletkult, you will get just ordinary labor magazines, without any exception, very poorly edited; still more poorly written. They are not even more revolutionary, or more free from convention, than what has always been regarded as radical literature in Russia and in other countries. But put back the label of the Proletkult, and immediately you get pretensions to a setting that is not justified at all by the contents or even the spirit of the publications.

If we take the Proletkult poetry that we have just considered and call it simply labor poetry, it will not jar at all in a setting of ordinary, human culture. Most of it is primitively naïve and crude. Much of it is arrogantly bombastic. Possibly three quarters of the best of it that I have read is not only lacking in that special, exalted meaning which the adepts of the Proletkult are trying to read into it, but really has no meaning at all: it is merely words, and often very banal and commonplace words. But that is natural: "where the sword is flashing, art can never bloom."

The group that produces this poetry is simply a group, like any other of its kind. There are among them talented men and also a good deal of mediocrity. Most of them are young; they may develop into something bigger. Not one of them has, as yet, shown signs of real genius. If the fates are kind to them, they may even develop a strong tendency in their art.

But to invest them with the dignity of the creators of a new culture is to give them a setting that is false and artificial.

And it is interesting that Lunacharsky himself, who is a playwright of considerable talent, in a play which was recently presented in all the best theatres of Soviet Russia under the title *Power* (the original title of the play is *The King's Barber*), represents not even a rippling echo of those very characteristics which make up the ideological basis of the Proletkult. It is a picture of the monstrous growth of an individual will, that of the King, who desires to extend his will above law and custom and morality, yet whose will is thwarted by another individual will, that of the barber.

It is interesting too, that the weekly magazine, *Plamya* (*The Flame*), which Lunacharsky publishes in Petrograd and of which he was the active editor until the beginning of the past year, has not a trace of the fundamental motives of the Proletkult. On the contrary, it is strongly futuristic, which is just the opposite of what the Proletkult is supposed to stand for.

What has happened to the Proletkult in Russia is exactly what has happened to many another phase of the Communist movement: the pretensions of its theory were found to be entirely incommensurate with the means at hand, available for the realization of its ideas. Lunacharsky himself is now making rather strenuous efforts to merge the Proletkult with the various divisions of his Commissariat of Education. For he has apparently come to the conclusion that the work which the Proletkult is doing is merely parallel with that done by his department. And this duplication of effort is costing the Soviet Government a great deal of money in subsidies, etc. Such an attempt at merging the two was made at a recent Conference of the Proletkult in Moscow. For the time being, the active workers of the Proletkult have won the day: the Conference rejected the proposal of a merger. But it is clear that this victory will continue theirs only as long as the Proletkult is wanted by the Soviet leaders for something more than its pretensions to being the basis of a new culture.

Even Lunacharsky, no doubt, realizes now that the Proletkult, at least as the idea has translated itself into actual forms in

Russia, is built upon the sands of artificiality, so far as these vast pretensions are concerned. In its naïveté, its primitive crudeness, and its oftentimes arrogant bombast, it can scarcely provide a substitute or even a guiding and active agent for those cultural achievements which have attended and crowned the spiritual endeavors of mankind for so many centuries. And how many are there among convinced Socialists themselves who would be ready to accept these qualities of the Proletkult as the fundamental cultural moments of the *Ecclesia militans*—and, consequently, the precursors of the *Ecclesia triumphans*—of Socialism?

The Russian Proletkult may bring some education and enlightenment to a hundred or two hundred thousand factory workmen in Russia. It may help and encourage some of them to develop whatever talent there may be in them in the domains of literature and art. To this extent, it may do good. But as a basis for a new culture, which is to supplant the present-day civilization, the Proletkult movement seems like that bird in the old Russian story, which tried to set the sea on fire.

What, then, becomes of the world rôle of the Proletkult movement, to invest it with which such strenuous attempts are now being made?

This rôle reduces itself to making the Proletkult movement, not primarily, but exclusively, another weapon in the struggle for the introduction of Communism throughout the world, an adjunct of the aggressive machinery of Communism which is being built up in the form of the Third International. And as such, the Proletkult is merely the expression of another phase of that more primitive stage of social development to which Communism would turn back the wheel of history.

LEO PASVOLSKY.